
The Name "Pañcarātra"

Author(s): J. A. B. van Buitenen

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J. A. B. van Buitenen

THE NAME

‘ ‘ P A Ñ C A R Ā T R A ’ ’

The followers of the so-called Pañcarātra sect have invented numerous explanations for the word *pañcarātra*, which has become the general name of that class of Āgama texts from which the sect derives its ritual traditions. These interpretations invariably start from the element *pañca*, “five,” and the implications which a set of *five* may have for the system: the five is connected with sets of five doctrines, or to the organization of the subject matter in the texts, which may be divided into five chapters; and they ignore the element *°rātra-* which so mysteriously forms part of the name. When some kind of pentad has been selected, *°rātra-* is interpreted in a fanciful way to agree with that pentad. For instance, the Naradiya Saṃhitā gives *rātri* the sense of “knowledge,” and five kinds of knowledge are then supposed to be represented by *pañcarātra*.¹ Not much greater interest should be attached to the fact that the Mahāsanatkumāra Saṃhitā is divided into five parts called “Nights”;² for although Schrader leaves open the possibility that *rātri* may have acquired a sectarian meaning of a “cardinal doctrine as well as the chapter or work dealing with that doctrine,” it is clear that any such “meaning” of *rātri* must be secondary: it presupposes “Pañcarātra” as the name of the system, for

¹ F. O. Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra and the Ahirbudhnya Saṃhitā* (Adyar, 1916), p. 24.

² *Ibid.*

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rātri is not known anywhere else in such meanings as “tantra” or “saṃhitā.”

Schrader himself³ is inclined to believe that the original use of the word *pañcarātra*, which literally means “[something] lasting five nights [and days],” is connected only with the conception of the quintuple god, who is manifested as *para*, *vyūha*, *vibhava*, *antaryāmin*, and *arcā*, and that this original use can be discovered from the *pañcarātram sattram* of Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 13.6.1.1. This interesting passage links Nārāyaṇa with a five-day sacrifice. It reads: “*puruṣo ha nārāyaṇa ’kāmayata / atitiṣṭheyam sarvāṇi bhūtāni aham evedaṃ sarvaṃ syām iti sa etaṃ puruṣamedhaṃ pañcarātram yajñakratum apaśyat tam āharat tenāyajata teneṣṭvātyatiṣṭhat sarvāṇi bhūtānīdaṃ sarvaṃ abhavat* (‘This *puruṣa*, Nārāyaṇa, desired: ‘May I surpass all these beings, may I be all this world.’ He found the *puruṣamedha*, a five-day sacrifice, took it, sacrificed with it. Having sacrificed with it, he surpassed all beings and became all this world’’).

Without any doubt this passage must be connected with the famous Puruṣa Hymn (R̥gveda 10.90), and it is inspired either directly by this hymn or by the same myth which underlies the hymn. While in R̥gveda 10.90 the *puruṣa* is not identified by name, in our passage he is identified as Nārāyaṇa; but this deity is mentioned as the seer who first saw the hymn R̥gveda 10.90. As in 10.93.3, the *puruṣa* in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa passage both exceeds creation and constitutes it; creation likewise proceeds by means of, or in fact consists in, a *puruṣamedha*, the sacrifice of a man, of which the *puruṣa* is here the agent, there the victim. This *puruṣamedha* is qualified as *pañcarātra*, “lasting five days”; that it is a five-day rite is not inexplicable. To me it seems that this pentad must be associated with the role of the number five in many *agnicayana* speculations on the world, its creation and inventory, where, for example, the five layers of bricks are made to represent the five layers of creation and the five stages in which creation is effected. Likewise Nārāyaṇa becomes “all this” in five days.

Although this Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa passage cannot be said to be irrelevant to the development of Nārāyaṇa’s divinity and creator’s function, still the possibility that it has suggested the use of *pañcarātra* as the name of a system associated with Nārāyaṇa must be judged to be very remote. The connection of *pañcarātra* and Nārāyaṇa in the passage is incidental and, as we saw, part of a completely different context. Besides, one casts about in vain in early Pañcarātra for a characteristic pentad which could have invited the association with

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

the *pañca* in the name. Even if we agree with Schrader that the epical Nārāyaṇīya, in which all but one of the explicit references to Pañcarātra in the Mahābhārata are to be found, is a second-hand account, it is evidence enough, along with the Saṃhitās, that the theory of this system was not at all typified by any pentad, but by a tetrad: the quaternity of the godhead, namely, Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari, and Kṛṣṇa, who are overshadowed by the Kṛṣṇaite quaternity of Vāsudeva, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha.

It would therefore seem to me that an entirely different approach to the problem of the name is indicated. Of what precisely does “Pañcarātra” consist? The Saṃhitās present us with a highly disproportionate dual division of the contents of the system: on the one hand, an ever more atrophied “philosophy,” which serves as a superstructure, and, on the other, an exuberantly growing ritual part, which is really the principal content. In the old Pādma Tantra the proportion is one to ten.⁴ In the important Pārameśvara Saṃhitā, the ritual manual of the old “pañcarātric” service in the Raṅganātha temple of Śrīraṅgam, the *jñānakāṇḍa* is almost wholly lost—if it was ever there.⁵ It is very hard to make out what kind of ritual observances went with epical Pañcarātra,⁶ but it seems safe to assume that the development of Pañcarātra took place mostly in its ritual component to the detriment of the superstructure of philosophy, to such an extent that, except for a characteristic doctrine or two, “Pañcarātra” was tantamount to this ritual.

It was principally ritual in the view of the earliest apologist of Pañcarātra of whose views we are informed. Yāmuna, in his Āgama-prāmāṇya,⁷ does not accent the philosophical component at all, beyond a defense of the Vyūha doctrine against the attacks of Śaṅkara and Bhāskara in their commentaries on Brahmasūtras 2.2.42–45. First of all he understands Pañcarātra as a tradition of ritual worship. For him it signifies certain typical sacraments like the *dīkṣā*, or “consecration,” *ārādhana*, or “propitiation,” and other aspects of a ritual surrounding an iconic God; *pūjā*, the devotion to the *arcā* or “image,” function and use of *nirmālya* and *naivedya*; rites like the *pañcakālīkā*. Pañcarātra conveys a very similar significance to the Vedāntadeśika in the Śrīpañcarātrarakṣā.

⁴ If we take the parts dealing with *jñāna* and *yoga* together (cf. Schrader, *op. cit.*, p. 22).

⁵ Govindācārya, *Śrī Pārameśvara Saṃhitā* (Śrīraṅgam, 1953); only the first adhyāya constitutes the “jñānakāṇḍa,” and most of that chapter is devoted to praise of Pañcarātra and the text itself.

⁶ The *pañcakāla* ritual is mentioned regularly; see below.

⁷ I refer here to a study of this text to be published soon.

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Whatever its ritual epiphenomena, the Pañcarātra as described in the Nārāyaṇīya was of a very different kind. It was a religious philosophy and discipline, comparable to Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Pāsupata, with which it is repeatedly enumerated.⁸ The theory centers on a set of four principles, which present a pattern that is closely related to that of some schools in epical Sāṃkhya, but are conspicuous insofar as they are consistently identified with mythical personalities.

The Supreme Being is said to have a fourfold nature. Two series of names describe these four natures or “aspects.” One is of minor importance, the other of major and enduring importance. It is related⁹ that the eternal Nārāyaṇa was born the son of Dharma in four forms in the Kṛta age during the Svāyambhuva manvantara as Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari, and Kṛṣṇa Svāyambhuva. The devotion to Nārāyaṇa, which is the general concern of the Nārāyaṇīya—a devotion also called Sātvatamata and supposed to have been proclaimed by the sun¹⁰—is particularly associated with the people of Śvetadvīpa to the north of the Milk Sea. Although thus there was a definite identification of both doctrine and devotion with the personality of Nārāyaṇa, the most common description of the quaternity of God is in Kṛṣṇaite terms: Vāsudeva, Saṃkarṣaṇa (or Baladeva), Pradyumna, and Aniruddha. In the terms of this relationship, which is, above all, a kinship relationship, is also captured the relation between God, soul, and body.

The Supreme Being, the soul of all beings, is Vāsudeva, who, from a more “philosophical” point of view, is also the Puruṣa in his transcendent state. This *puruṣa* enters the five elements which together constitute the body.¹¹ The context conveys that from this contact between *puruṣa* and body the *jīva* appears, that is, the embodied soul, or the *puruṣa* in an embodied state. This *jīva* is occasionally called Śeṣa¹²—a name related to Nārāyaṇa—but much more frequently Saṃkarṣaṇa,¹³ the name of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva’s half-brother. Saṃkarṣaṇa produces the *manas*,¹⁴ or mind, which is also described

⁸ For example, MBh. 12. (Bombay) 339.111 (cr. ed. 326.100); 349 (337).1; 64 (62–63).

⁹ 12.334 (321).8–9.

¹⁰ For example, 12.335 (322).19; 24.

¹¹ 12.339 (326).33–34: “tad [sc. *śarīram*, constituted of the five elements, st. 32] āviśati brahman na drśyo laghuvikramaḥ / utpanna eva bhavati śarīram ceṣṭayan prabhuḥ // na vinā dhātusamghātaṃ śarīram bhavati kvacit / na ca jivam vinā brahman vāyavaś ceṣṭayanty uta.”

¹² 12.339 (326).35.

¹³ 12.339 (326).35; cf. also MBh. 5.67: *saṃkarṣaṇam agrajaṃ sarvabhūtānām*, and created by Kṛṣṇa; thus 12.207 (200).10; 344 (332).16.

¹⁴ 12.339 (326).37–38.

as an incarnation of Sanatkumāra,¹⁵ but most frequently identified with Kṛṣṇa's son by Rukminī,¹⁶ Pradyumna. From this *manas* called Pradyumna originates the one who is "agent, cause and instrument, from whom the universe of moving and unmoving entities derives, the God manifest in all action,"¹⁷ the ego-organ Ahaṁkāra, named Aniruddha after Pradyumna's son.

This doctrine apparently enjoyed considerable currency and in many places in the epic, also outside the Mokṣadharmā section, references to it may be found. The best way to describe it is: Kṛṣṇa devotion gone philosophical. The philosophical basis is easily recognizable; it is that of the so-called eight evolving natures or *prakṛtis* (*jīva*, *manas*, *ahaṁkāra*, and the five elements). The first three seem to deviate from the more usual set of the *buddhi*,¹⁸ *ahaṁkāra*, and *manas*; and there is occasion to wonder if the series is not in fact a variation of the more ancient, seven-*prakṛti* series, in which the *jīva* heads the series of seven evolvents. Noteworthy is the "personalization." By personalizing these principles an attempt is made to describe what relation, evolutionary or otherwise, exists between them. The fact that God is called Vāsudeva and the embodied soul Saṁkarṣaṇa proves that an independent coexistence of God and the individual soul was admitted: for Saṁkarṣaṇa is Kṛṣṇa's half-brother, not his son. Besides, the fact that the embodied soul, the *jīva*, is identified with Saṁkarṣaṇa may go to show that the relation between *jīva* and *manas* was at one stage not viewed as a cause-effect relation (Saṁkarṣaṇa is not Pradyumna's father), which would bring us farther into antiquity when there was not yet an evolutionary relationship between the *prakṛtis*.

It is not clear what relation obtains between the Kṛṣṇaite series and that of Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari, and Kṛṣṇa Svāyambhuva. After the latter series has been described as the manifestation of the four-fold God,¹⁹ only the former Kṛṣṇaite series is enlarged upon, when an account is given of Nārada's visit to Śvetadvīpa.²⁰ And on Nārada's

¹⁵ Cf. MBh. 1.67: Pradyumna is an incarnation of Sanatkumāra; in 10.12 S. is the name of Kṛṣṇa's son by Rukminī.

¹⁶ Cf. also MBh. 6.65, where Kṛṣṇa creates himself out of himself as Pradyumna, and evolves Aniruddha from Pradyumna; in 13.159 Pradyumna is Kṛṣṇa's third form; these and similar texts deserve more study, particularly from the point of view whether the identification of Kṛṣṇa, etc. with evolutionary principles has influenced their relations.

¹⁷ 12.339 (326).38.

¹⁸ But *manas* may take the place of *buddhi*; cf. my "Studies in Sāṁkhya 3: Sattva" (Journal of the American Oriental Society 77.2; 1957).

¹⁹ 12.334 (321).9.

²⁰ 12.336 (323).27 ff.

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return to the Bādari hermitage, only Nara and Nārāyaṇa are brought back on the scene.²¹ Perhaps we here have to do with regional variations in philosophically developing Vaiṣṇavism, variations that are destined to be absorbed into a “*Pañcarātra*” system.

The tradition in which the cosmology and individuation theory of *puruṣa*, *jīva*, *manas*, and *ahaṁkāra* was formulated with Kṛṣṇaite nomenclature, and which surely also involved a Kṛṣṇa devotion, is described as Sātvata, Bhāgavata, and *Pañcarātra*. But in the context of this tradition the literal meaning of the last name, “that of the five nights,” does not admit of interpretation. It is remarkable that the Nārāyaṇīya itself makes an attempt to reinterpret the term *pañcarātra*. In the Nārāyaṇa litany 12.338 (325).4 Nārāyaṇa is called *pañcayajña pañcakālakartṛpate pāñcarātrika*: “[Homage to] Thee of the five offerings, lord of those who perform the *pañcakāla* ritual, Thee of the *Pañcarātra*.” Unless I am mistaken, this points to an interpretation of *pāñcarātrika* as relating to that tradition which observes pentads of rituals; here, then, for the first time, an attempt at interpretation based exclusively on the number five.

An explicit reference to the *Pañcakāla* is to be found in 12.336 (323).51:

tair iṣṭaḥ pañcakālañjair harir ekāntibhir naraiḥ /
bhaktyā paramayā yuktair manovākkarmabhis tadā //

(“Hari [Viṣṇu] is worshiped by those men, seeking exclusiveness, who know the *Pañcakāla*, who have supreme devotion in thought, speech and action”).

If my suggestion that the Nārāyaṇīya connects the name *pañcarātra* with *pañcayajña/pañcakāla* is right, we still must regard this as a reinterpretation; for *pañcarātra*, a span of five nights and days, cannot originally have signified a ritual taking place five times a day.

More than for the aid it gives in discovering the etymology of *Pañcarātra* as the name of a tradition, the epical evidence is helpful for the understanding of the tradition’s milieu. The juxtaposition of it with Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Pāśupata,²² the references to the esoteric nature of the doctrine, and the intimations concerning the ascetic life of its adherents, suggest strongly that the *Pañcarātra* way of life was typically that of those seekers after wisdom and enlightenment whose beliefs and practices were somewhat outside the pale of Vedic ritualist sacerdotalism. Like so many wandering sages, recluses, and pilgrims who from the sixth century B.C. (and doubtless before) went about preaching, or settled down in semi-retirement from active life to a life of contemplation, the *Pāñcarātrikas*, whose doctrine later on also re-

²¹ 12.339 (326).110–11.

²² Also with Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Vedāraṇyaka: 12.349 (337).1.

mains linked with the innovators rather than the conservatives, seem also to have been part of that eremitical movement which largely reformed the Vedic tradition in the last millennium B.C. These seekers were not necessarily organized in definite groupings—although the very fact of the early emergence of “monastic” orders in Buddhism and Jainism indicates that many of them adapted to an existing pattern and observed similar or comparable regulations and vows, which could become a basis for a monastic rule. The commonest and most decisive of such vows were homelessness and its corollary, religious mendicancy. Pilgrimage, both for the blessing of the sacred places and for the liberality of the crowds sure to be there, gave direction to their vagrancy.

If we then find that non-doctrinaire literature mentions people styling themselves Pāñcarātrikas who have no clear creedal affiliations but fall neatly in the pattern of the wandering saint, we are not particularly surprised; for in Pāñcarātra as the name of a certain system we may well have the specialized usage of a term that once had a wider scope and denoted a characteristic of a group of people among whom a significant number—if only in one region—became so representative that henceforth the name was attached to them and their doctrine.

The oldest extant version of the Bṛhatkathā, Budhavsāmin's Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṃgraha,²³ which gives an excellent picture of life on what we may call the middle-class level, attaches the name of Pāñcarātrika to a certain householder. This householder (in this text this term is generally used for a *vaiśya*) is a prosperous farmer who, when getting old, decides to give up his old way of life and to look for salvation. It may be a result of the condensation of the text that he is already called a *parivrāṭ pāñcarātrikaḥ*²⁴ before he has effectively given up home and possessions. In 22.63 he complains: “dhyānādhyāya-pradhānaṃ ca vihitam bhikṣukarma yat / vaiśyakarmābhiyuktasya tasya nāmāpi nāsti me // (“To act as a mendicant in the way it is enjoined, with principal devotion to meditation and study, is not for me, as I am engaged in the duties of a *vaiśya*”²⁵). Turned *pāñcarātrika* he is but a minor sādhu—though later he proves to possess the faculty of prevision—and he is rather fuzzy on theory: “The sages of old have prescribed that those who have chosen to establish a household should

²³ Edited and translated by Félix Lacôte (translation continued by Louis Renou), Paris, 1908–29.

²⁴ BKŚS. 21.59.

²⁵ This is probably the correct translation; otherwise Lacôte, *op. cit.*, whom I followed in *Tales of Ancient India* (Chicago, 1959), p. 131.

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go on a pilgrimage to the holy places, when with advancing age they become lax in the performance of their duties. The Vedānta school holds that one should be guided by Brahman the Ferryman. Thus if one aspires to liberation, he must not omit Avimukta near Benares from his itinerary. Therefore I have decided to depart for Benares tomorrow, for the religion of the Buddha has a reputation for efficiency.”

The passage gives an amusing picture of the probably general confusion in the minds of minor mendicants. Pilgrimages make him think of sacred fords (*tīrthas*), which remind him of *Tāraka*, both as a name of Brahman and a ferryman, which reminds him of the ferry to the Avimukta, the most sacred quarter of Benares, and of Tārā, the Buddhist goddess. Clearly, also, his *pāñcarātri* character implies no special allegiance to any special doctrine; the word merely qualifies *parivrāj* “a wanderer of the five nights.”

What do these five nights mean? The same text tells us precisely. The occasion is a conversation between a (disguised) Pāśupata wanderer and his young Brahmin friend. The wanderer remarks to the youth that his affection for him has caused him to overstay his time in Rājagṛha and that he is now obliged to depart. For even householders have to obey certain observances for their own good, let alone those who seek after the highest good. He continues: “You know this life-rule of the wanderers: ‘ekarātraṃ vased grāme pañcarātraṃ muniḥ pure’ (‘the sage must live one night in a village, five nights in town’).”²⁶

This “life-rule” does not apply to Pāśupatas alone: the householder of the other narrative was not a Pāśupata. But it seems unquestionable that what made this householder a “wanderer of the five nights” was precisely the observance of this life-rule of the wanderers. What both have in common in the stories is that the life-rule keeps them on the road, and that the road leads them to places of pilgrimage. In this context a *pāñcarātri* is a follower of the five-nights rule, a minor and not particularly respectable wanderer,²⁷ whose wanderings lead him to places of religious interest. The choice of his *tīrtha* is naturally dictated by his general religious orientation, by the *iṣṭadevatā*, one may say, of the pilgrim, though many will be common to all denominations.

The rule to which the Pāśupata refers with such evident confidence²⁸

²⁶ BKŚS. 22.220.

²⁷ One is reminded of the disrespect in which, according to Yāmuna, *op. cit.*, systematized Pañcarātra was held; it may be relevant that MBh. 3.189.9–10 states that Nārāyaṇa was worshipped by kṣatriyas and vaiśyas.

²⁸ But the Brahmin youth was an expert on *dharma*.

that it is a matter of common knowledge is in fact also found elsewhere. Vijñāneśvara,²⁹ commenting in his *Mitākṣara* on Yājñavalkya-smṛti 3.58 and dealing in general with a saṁnyāsi's residence, adds this śloka, quoted from Kāṇva:

*ekarātram vased grāme nagare rātripañcakam /
varṣābhyo 'nyatra varṣāsu māsāṃs tu caturo vaset //*

It would seem to me that this sense of *pāñcarātri*ka is likely to be original. Originally it referred to an itinerant religious recluse, who followed the characteristic five-nights rule, by which he was bound to move out of town after every five nights to stay a night in a village. There were also other rules, of which the best known is the one that orders one to move daily.³⁰ Such wanderers need not belong to any particular school or system, though they would, as pilgrims, be guided by special devotions to deities. But devotional religion often went philosophical, and it then acquired a set of doctrines which more and more identified the wanderers in a culture where the desire for clear group identification is paramount.

We may assume that in certain regions, especially those of the great Vaiṣṇava centers, the *pāñcarātri*ka was known as a devotee of Nārāyaṇa or Kṛṣṇa. The name may have stuck to him when, on the one hand, Kṛṣṇaism was systematized by the adaptation of Kṛṣṇa legend to general philosophical principles, with certain ritual observances, etc., and, on the other hand, the *pāñcarātri* rule itself fell into desuetude. The name *pāñcarātri*ka was then re-analysed as "follower of the Pañcarātri system," and a name Pañcarātri derived from *pāñcarātri*ka as the name of that system which *pāñcarātrika*s followed.

²⁹ I am indebted for this reference to J. D. M. Derrett in a personal communication; he also points to Gautama quoted by Lakṣmīdhara, *Kṛtyakalpataru*, Mokṣakāṇḍa (ed. K. V. R. Aiyangar, Baroda, 1945), p. 49, which is referred to by Medhātithi on Manu 6.43.

³⁰ The five-night rule may be considered a relaxation of rigidity, well in keeping with the somewhat lowly character of its followers; Derrett also refers me to K. V. R. Aiyangar, *Aspects of the Social and Political System of the Manusmṛti* (Lucknow, 1949), pp. 140–41, where a three-night rule seems to be implied.